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ABSTRACT

Over a 12-year teaching career--7 years on the college level--an instructor has found that his healthy identity as a gay male informs his performance in the contact zone of the classroom in ways that may be different than that of heterosexual teachers. It appears that gay male composition teachers who are less closeted view their sexual orientation as having more positive influences upon their teaching practices. A study by Pat Griffin found that both gay and lesbian teachers rely on one of four "identity management strategies" that vary according to the individual teacher's willingness to disclose information about sexual orientation: "passing," "covering," "implicitly out," and "explicitly out." One teacher who operates at the "covering" level of identity management admits that he exerts extra energy avoiding full disclosure; he does not think his praxis is noticeably affected. For teachers who are "out" in other aspects of their lives, covering strategies often act as restraining orders, keeping educators from exploring other pedagogical practices and influencing the assignments they choose. Teachers who are implicitly or explicitly out support the idea that eliminating the worry about sexual orientation frees them to focus on praxis in ways that may have been off-limits when they were teaching from the closet or "covering." (CR)

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Contact and Comfort Zones: Gay Male Praxis in the Composition Classroom

Midway through the second term of my first year in college, I moved out of the dorm and into a windowless, oversized closet located behind the washeteria in a large apartment complex. Using studying as an excuse, I retreated from most fraternity and social activities, emerging mainly to attend classes and go to work. I did study. But I spent most of my time thinking--no "agonizing" is a better word--about my sexual identity. I even tried fulfilling an essay assignment by writing about my struggles. However, when my teacher returned the introductory paragraph, my eyes immediately locked onto his advice: "I think you should consider another topic." It was back to my tiny apartment where Bette Midler's "Am I Blue?" got me through another evening of introspection. Each time she asked "Was I gay, 'til today?" I answered "yes." And each time I lifted the stereo needle and put Bette back to work, my "yes" became stronger until I knew I could answer no other way.

Over the past twenty years, I have found myself replying to Bette's question in the affirmative but in different ways, particularly in the composition classroom. Over my twelve-year teaching career--seven years on the college level--I have found that my healthy identity as a gay male informs my performance in the contact zone of the classroom in ways that may be different from heterosexual teachers. Most importantly, I have found that gay male composition teachers create comfort zones in the classroom based on their willingness to disclose information about their sexual orientation. In the end, the level of "outness" that gay male teachers exhibit appears to influence praxis in both negative and positive ways, even pointing to a correlation between "outness" and the use of personal writing.

Sharing a homosexual orientation with my lesbian sisters does not qualify me as a Grand Spokesperson for all gay and lesbian composition teachers. However, I can speak confidently from a gay male perspective. After thoughtfully analyzing my pedagogical practices and after talking with other gay male composition teachers, I have come to realize that sexual orientation comprises only one part of our identity. Distinctions in race, ethnicity, class, religion, age, and physical abilities also play roles in constructing the personas we

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present in our classrooms. This realization is shared by others such as Rita Kissen, whose 1996 book *The Last Closet* focuses on gay and lesbian public school teachers, and Mary Elliott, whose October 1996 *College English* essay "Coming Out of the Closet" addresses gay and lesbian teaching experiences in higher education. Both Kissen and Elliott maintain that sexual orientation is often a more critical factor than we realize in determining individual identities that are reflected in pedagogies.

The willingness to share information about our identities appears to be one unique aspect of the gay male teaching experience. For heterosexual teachers, disclosing sexuality is normally not an issue. Rather, it's something that is usually revealed offhandedly with comments about a spouse or children. Gay male teachers are not so free with providing personal information for obvious reasons. Since heterosexuality is the "norm"--the way of the world--gay teachers must be careful, if they want to keep their jobs, gain tenure, obtain sabbaticals, and achieve recognition. And even if the political climate seems supportive, gay male teachers may not be *willing* to reveal their sexual orientation. For some, it may be a matter of philosophy, whether they think the typical college student is not mature enough to handle such an issue or whether they think personal revelations of any kind are inappropriate. However, for the majority of gay male composition teachers, revealing their sexual orientation is a highly personal, individual choice that largely depends upon how they have accepted their own sexuality and how important it is for them to share that information--particularly with their students.

A study conducted by University of Massachusetts professor Pat Griffin proves helpful in analyzing how levels of disclosure about sexual orientation may affect gay male composition praxis. Griffin interviewed both gay and lesbian teachers and found that they rely on one of four "identity management strategies" that vary according to the individual teacher's willingness to disclose information about sexual orientation. "Passing," the first and most closeted strategy, entails presenting and staunchly defending oneself as heterosexual, resorting to lying, if need be. The second approach--"covering"--means that gay teachers monitor their words and actions, not outright lying but depending on half-truths, avoidance,

and skillful rhetorical strategies that avoid full disclosure. Teachers using the third strategy--being "implicity out"-- assume that most people know they are gay, but they stop short of making public announcements about their sexual orientation. Finally, "explicitly out" teachers employ full disclosure in all aspects of their lives--even in the classroom (175-79). We apparently move through the comfort level continuum at a pace largely dependent upon our self-images as gay males and the political climate of the departments, institutions, and communities in which we teach.

Although many people may resist categorization, using these identity management strategy classifications provides a way of analyzing praxis in composition classes taught by gay males. Indications point to the strong possibility that the level of outness a teacher exhibits in the classroom--which identity strategy he employs--has both negative and positive effects upon pedagogy. It appears that teachers operating at the most closeted level--the "passing" stage"--may experience the most dissonance when it comes to praxis. Since they are trying to project the false persona of a heterosexual male, gay teachers who rely on "passing" report that they often expend wasted energy keeping up appearances. Additionally, some gay teachers who rely on "passing" admit that their self-confidence is damaged, which may negatively impact their teaching effectiveness. Also, teachers who "pass" may limit their classroom offerings, omitting homosexuality and other issues of "social consciousness" from their lists of reading and writing topics. For example, Bruce Pittman* taught first-year composition at The University of Alabama for two years as a graduate assistant and admits that he relied on "passing" strategies every day of his teaching life. He says he was "pretty self-loathing" at the time, which carried over into the classroom with--what he calls--"a negative attitude and a tough-guy image." Paranoid about keeping his homosexuality a secret, Pittman claims that he "taught on edge probably every single day." He avoided personal writing and any discussions of homosexuality, even skipping two essays in the reader that addressed the issue of sexual orientation. In the end, Pittman's experiences in the composition classroom proved so unsettling that he changed career plans, becoming a lawyer instead.

Other gay male composition teachers start out in the "passing" stage and progress further as their self-concepts and job conditions change over time. William Freeman has taught composition in the Illinois community college system for 25 years, and most of the time he tried to "pass" as heterosexual. Freeman admits that lying and "playing a part" every class period exacted a toll. Not only was teaching energy wasted, but his self-esteem was also damaged. In his words: "I used to feel really bad because I couldn't be as personal or personable as my heterosexual friends. They could talk about their husbands or wives or kids and I couldn't talk about anybody." Like Pittman, Freeman says he avoided anything even remotely related to homosexuality and provided few opportunities for personal writing. He says he didn't think it was fair to ask students to write about their lives when he couldn't make offhand comments about his own personal life.

I agree with Pittman and Freeman that passing is defeating, constricting, and rather hypocritical. I have always stressed honesty with my students, even when I was placing pictures of girlfriends on my desk and openly dating women to throw people off my trail. Rather than damaging my teaching performance, I think passing kept me from being a better teacher because I was too tentative, a little uneasy. But I've always been a good actor, even though gays and lesbians always think others aren't as perceptive as they really are.

It appears that gay male composition teachers who are less closeted view their sexual orientation as having more positive influences upon their teaching practices. Teachers who use "covering" strategies still expend a certain amount of energy avoiding disclosures of sexual orientation. But because they are not so overtly concerned about projecting a heterosexual persona to the classroom, they can usually enjoy more freedom in being themselves and encouraging students to do the same. Additionally, they may be less rigid in their assignments, particularly less squeamish about issues concerning sexuality. Carl Britton is a former composition teacher who is currently employed in educational administration in Arkansas. He says that in moving from the "passing" to the "covering" comfort level he was able to loosen up and shift his focus from trying to be perfect to treating students as individuals. When he was "passing," Britton felt he had to work twice as hard to

prove himself to those who may have suspected he was gay. He contends that his more relaxed attitude influenced his praxis by allowing for more exploration of personal topics and for more interaction with his students.

John Delaney--who has taught composition classes at three different universities in Canada and the United States--operates at the "covering" level of identity management. Even though he admits that he exerts extra energy avoiding full disclosure, he doesn't think his praxis is noticeably affected. Delaney adds that because of his sexual orientation, he is probably more willing to challenge students' perceived notions about writing, developing arguments, providing evidence, and constructing knowledge. He is also not so afraid of including gay-themed material, which he places at the end of the semseter because by then his students trust him. Delaney says that one of the ways of teaching composition is by relating things to personal life, which he tries to do. However, he doesn't teach the personal narrative, opting for academic discourse assingments that are "much safer pedagogical tools."

For teachers like Delaney, who are "out" in other aspects of their lives, "covering" strategies often act as restraining orders, keeping educators from exploring other pedagogical practices and influencing the assignments they choose. Paul Gaither, a professor who taught composition for thirty-seven years in Arkansas universities, says if he had felt that his sexuality didn't matter, he would have been a much different teacher the first half of his career. He would have been less uptight and more willing to take a personal approach with his students, probably providing more opportunities for personal writing. He says he was "very traditional, extremely austere, almost unapproachable" during most of his career, a combination of his training and his hidden sexuality.

Brian Parks, Mark Medaris, and Larry White--who all teach at the same Texas university--agree that their training probably influences their praxis more than the level of "outness" they use in the classroom. They remind us that praxis is individually mediated and influenced by a host of factors, including teacher goals and personality. For Parks, not disclosing personal information about his sexuality orientation helps him keep "emotional distance." He says he does a better job when he's not so personally connected. In his words, "I think if I were

concerned about keeping aspects of their personal lives hidden, "out" gay male composition teachers say they take a more open attitude in working with students. This "more humanistic approach"--as one teacher describes it--may include more opportunities for students to tell their own stories, providing more evidence for a possible correlation between the level of outness and the use of personal writing.

Greg Volman is a composition teacher with seventeen years experience in Arkansas high schools and colleges who considers himself "implicitly out." When he was teaching near the "closeted/covering" end of the identity management continuum, Volman says he was much more "stuffy and boring," certainly more restrained and uptight. He also focused exclusively on critical analysis and the modes of writing. However, Volman now teaches an "issues-oriented" course that addresses a range of controversial topics, because he's "no longer afraid where class discussion and written responses may lead." Volman also gives students the option of responding personally on many assignments, something he avoided in his closeted years because of "what might have arisen."

Kevin McSpain has taught composition sixteen years in Mississippi high schools and community colleges. Since he doesn't worry anymore about "being found out," McSpain says he has a "different energy" and more confidence in the classroom. He is more willing to take risks with in devising creative teaching strategies. McSparin also agrees that since he has moved toward the "out" end of the continuum, he has found himself working more personal writing into his syllabus. But he admits that including more personal writing may be more a reactionary move to go against the grain and "be different" from other more traditional, formalist teachers.

Gaither says for the last half of his career he was "implicitly out." Even though he maintains that he was a "strict formalist until the very end," he thinks he became "a little more human" when he quit worrying about how his students were constructing him. He says his teaching style became less "reserved" and more personal. Gaither explains that he tried to look at his students more as individuals who were struggling with their own problems rather than as "empty pitchers who had to be filled with all the information" he could impart. He says

married with five children at home, I wouldn't talk about that either. That's not why we're assembled." Parks adds that when he did teach the personal narrative, he told students that he didn't want essays about "revelatory experiences." Rather, he wanted essays about the mundane--going to the grocery store or attending a birthday party. Medaris agrees that talking about his personal life is not pedagogically useful. Therefore, "covering" benefits him by allowing him to keep focused on the subject matter of the composition course--which, in his view--does not include consciousness raising. White believes that critical distance is valuable for students. He doesn't want to make them feel they have to assume a certain attitude because their teacher is gay. As for personal writing, White doesn't teach personal narrative any more because it wasn't a good assignment for him. He adds that his dismissal of the personal narrative probably has more to do with his ideas about pedagogy than with his sexual orientation. If he were to come out, White thinks the content of his composition course and his teaching style might be less traditional, but not necessarily more personal, since he doesn't see the classroom as a place for self-discovery. Then again, Gustafson admits that being open about his sexuality may turn him into "this other type of teacher" that he doesn't know about.

It appears, then, that gay male composition teachers using "covering" strategies view the effects upon praxis in different ways. In comparison to "passing," "covering" is likely seen as "step up" that allows for more latitude in exploring less traditional teaching strategies and in fostering a "praxis of the personal" that is important for some teachers. Of course, in comparison to identity strategies that allow teachers to be "out," "covering" may appear restrictive, perhaps an ever-present nuisance that gets in the way of investigating other pedagogical practices that may be beneficial for students and teachers alike.

Teachers who are either "implicitlly" or "explicity out" support the idea that eliminating the worry about sexual orientation frees them to focus on praxis in ways that they may have been off-limits when they were teaching from the closet or covering. "Out" gay male composition teachers say they are more confident educators but less traditional, less rigid, and less conservative about their assignments and their teaching methods. Because they are not so

that as his praxis took on a more student-centered focus, he found himself more interested in the stories they had to tell, and he allowed more opportunities for personal writing.

When I was "covering" as a graduate assistant at The University of Alabama, I don't remember having my composition students complete any personal writing assignments. During the first three years of my first full-time position--still in my "covering" phase--I began each composition course with the narrative. Then I moved to other writing modes, making assignments that usually precluded using personal experiences. After I was granted tenure, I found myself adopting a more "implicitly out" identity management strategy in the classroom.* The most noticeable change in my praxis was an increasing affinity for personal writing. Even though I was still teaching "the modes," I devised essay options that allowed students to incorporate personal writing. In fact, I found myself looking forward to reading the "revealing" essays because I realized that students had interesting stories to tell, narratives that could be used to fulfill many different writing purposes.

Certainly, teachers who dismiss personal writing may do so based on their beliefs about its pedagogical value. However, the risks of disclosure may exert a stronger influence than we want to admit in keeping personal writing in the closet. Teaching personal writing involves a different kind of openness and commitment than teaching academic discourse. Gay male composition teachers who are "out"--whether implicitly or explicitly--may be more willing to make that kind of commitment because they may be more aware of the power that lies in telling stories. Perhaps "out" composition teachers are not only less afraid of disclosing information about their sexual orientation but also less fearful of sharing the power that personal writing often provides.

*Alll names of composition teachers used in this essay are pseudonyms.

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